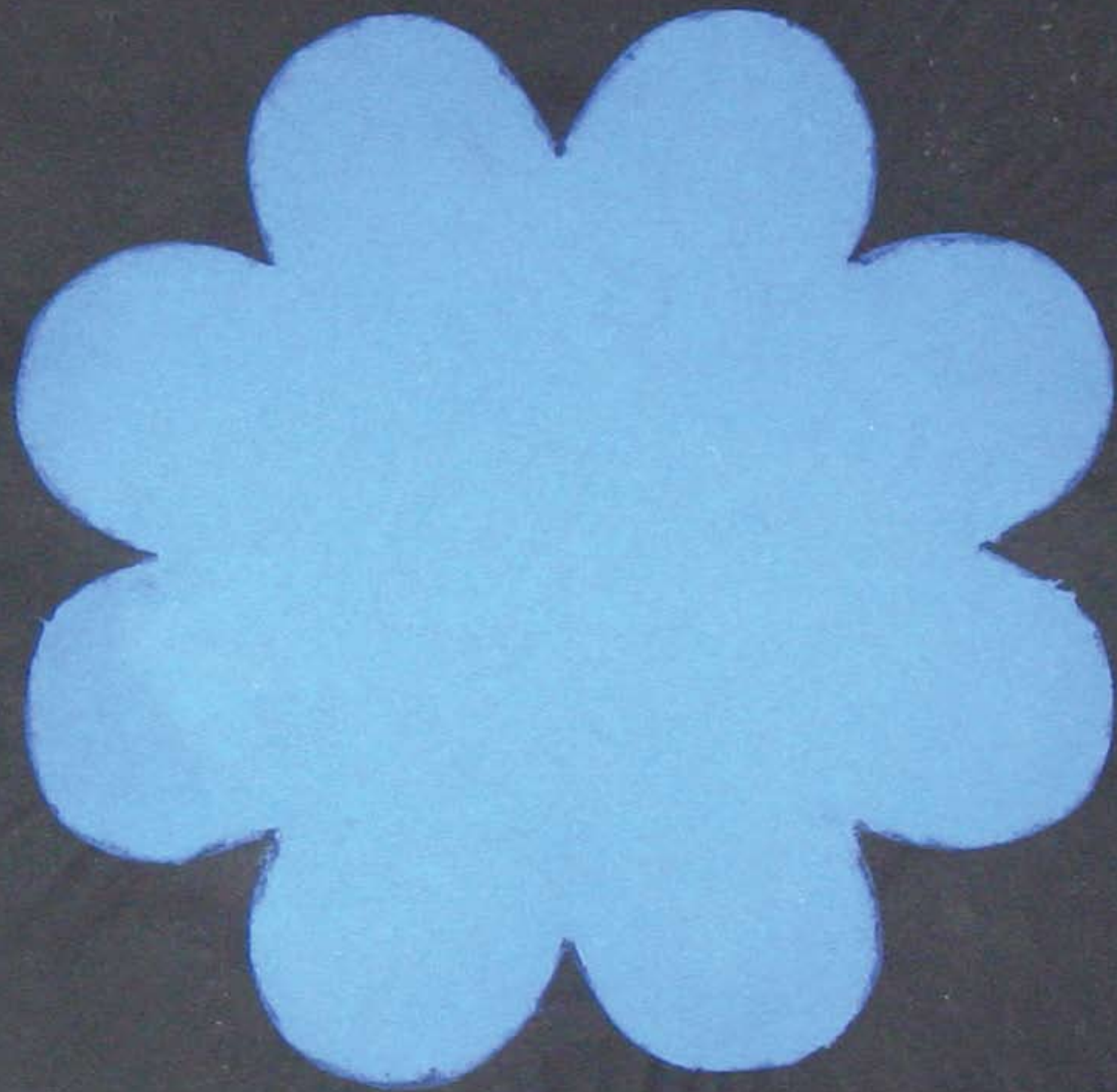


DIEU /
DONNE /

DIEU DONNÉ LAB GRANT PROGRAM
PUBLICATION SERIES NO. 9

Polly Apfelbaum
Basic Divisions

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Dazzling Disregard

by Susan Harris

For over twenty years, Apfelbaum has challenged, tested, pushed, and questioned the boundaries and definitions of different media, materials, and methods in her journey toward a multivalent vision of contemporary art. For thirty years, meanwhile, the mission of Dieu Donn e has been to actively support artists in their investigations toward the creation of innovative work in the area of hand papermaking. When Dieu Donn e invited Apfelbaum to participate in its Lab Grant Residency program, no one could have predicted how her explorations of techniques and ideas she had never before pursued would break new ground in reimagining what art could be—operating somewhere between and including printmaking, papermaking, drawing, painting, and sculpture.

Apfelbaum realized three projects at Dieu Donn e which, together, reflect the complexities and contradictions that ongoingly define and invigorate her work. Her art is founded on a constructive disregard for conventional distinctions between categories including abstraction, representation, minimalism, expressionism, conceptualism, color field, pattern, and decoration. Her practice has no single allegiance to painting, sculpture, installation, or drawing and is simultaneously controlled and intuitive, cerebral and gestural.

I am very attracted to that notion of a hard logic that is found in an unexpected place—in a world where everything is supposed to be simple and beautiful, things often turn out to be more complicated. I like the idea of doing pieces that are very beautiful and intuitive, seductive even, but that turn out to be more complex, to have more layers and more structure than people thought. In the end it's more interesting that way. (Apfelbaum as interviewed by Claudia Gould, *Polly Apfelbaum*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 2003)

During her 2002 Lab Grant residency, Apfelbaum began *Star Power* (2006), a series featuring four colored sets of "flags." Apfelbaum's interest in the political content and graphic punch of flags first manifested itself in an installation she did for the Lodz Biennale in Poland in 2004, and then in a silkscreen portfolio, *Flags of Revolt and Defiance* (2004), for which she chose thirty-three revolutionary flags of organizations ranging from the National Organization of Women to the Polish peasant insurrection to the Black Panthers—over which she imposed her own system of flower symbols that she appropriated from Warhol. *Star Power* adopts a visually striking, simple, uniform motif throughout the series even as it draws on the historical iconography of the flag as a container of meaning and emotion for a broad range of cultural and political constituencies and movements. Each of the four sets in the edition is comprised of five 6×9 inch sheets—the first sheet has one star, the second has two stars, the third has three stars, and so on up to five—specifically arranged by the artist. Highly color-saturated pigments were used to build up the eye-popping stars that suggest military insignia on a uniform or symbols on a flag—lending them object-like qualities that are further accentuated by wrinkles radiating outward on the surrounding handmade paper.

Seductive explosions of color balanced by an equal attentiveness to line characterize all three of Apfelbaum's projects for Dieu Donn e. The centuries-old debate over drawing vs. color is rendered moot in Apfelbaum's oeuvre in general, particularly since the early nineties when she began cutting into dyed patterns on synthetic fabric and placing the pieces on the floor. Essentially drawing directly into color, she set into motion, in now signature works such as *Eclipse* (1996), *Reckless* (1998), and *Black Flag* (2001–02), a fluid, ever-dynamic and mutually complementary symphony of color and line. With her recent impulse to engage in a more personal and direct process of drawing, Apfelbaum

began to doodle flowers by hand on brightly colored synthetic fabric. *Power to the Flower* (2007), Apfelbaum's second edition project with Dieu Donn e done in conjunction with their Collector's Series, consists of fifty individual flower pieces in addition to four sets of eight flowers whose shapes she took from Warhol's appropriations of flowers, and then drew by hand. Devising a system of color and form, Apfelbaum selected eight different shapes and twelve different colors, and executed every possible color-shape combination (there are ninety-six). Working with artistic director, Paul Wong, she made Mylar stencils from the shapes and set each of them within a geometric square on a wet sheet of black pulp. Brilliantly colored pulp of a density different from that of the black ground was used to fill in the shapes which when dry, created dense, flat emblems with crisp silhouettes and a rippling in the paper that are vestiges of the inventive process.

The freedom offered by the Dieu Donn e project to investigate previously untried possibilities ironically led Apfelbaum back to her own work. Not only did *Power to the Flower* reinforce the realization of how important drawing is to her art making, it returned to a recurring flower theme in her oeuvre that goes back to 1989 in works such as *Daisy Chain*, in which flower dingbats taken from the Warhol print SAS, were first drawn and then fabricated into blocks of raw wood. Other works, too, such as *A Pocket Full of Posies* (1990) and *Wallflowers* (1990), as well as the more recent *Love Park* series (2006) of woodblock prints—based on hundreds of flower doodles done on acetate that were transcribed into wood blocks of pure unmodulated color and then arranged and embossed on paper—are richly layered in how they bring flowers into play with a mix of references to Warhol, Pop Art, popular culture, Matisse, Abstract Expressionism, Pattern and Decoration, and 1960's flower power—each replete with their own battery of aesthetic, idealistic, political, and graphic associations. Viewed in the context of today's political and military developments, Apfelbaum's flowers and flags combine seriousness with whimsy in works that channel the anxiety and uncertainty that accompany our daily existence along with the ever present hope for the transformative power of peace and love.

A delirious, abstract expressionist-like patterning collides with austere, linear structures in *Basic Divisions*, 2006–07, a dazzling third project Apfelbaum completed at Dieu Donn e. Apfelbaum used a marbled paper technique for the backgrounds, separately mixing and pouring on felt all the various color pulps, then drawing through it with a tool to realize elaborate, decorative motifs. Superimposed over these painterly compositions are 1/4 inch solid graphite

lines drawn in minimal geometric configurations derived specifically from a chart in a book about flags. Framed and installed like flags, *Basic Divisions* juxtaposes and breathes new life into disparate visual systems, annexing the staid and celebratory connotations of a flag's programmatic visual vocabulary while mining various modes of painterly practice—all the while honoring and extending traditions of papermaking. *Basic Divisions*, *Power to the Flower*, and *Star Power* are all arresting achievements resulting from the successful and inspired collaboration between Apfelbaum, an artist with an ebullient spirit making meaningful and formally exciting work, and Dieu Donn e, an institution that is an unwavering advocate for the artist—both resolutely and wholeheartedly committed to the investigative process in contemporary art.

Susan Harris is a curator and writer of contemporary art based in New York City. She has a Master's Degree in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Her recent curatorial and publication projects include: Jim Hodges: A Line to You, and Nancy Spero: Weighing the Heart Against a Feather of Truth—both of which took place at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea in Santiago de Compostela, Spain; and two Richard Tuttle exhibitions at the Museu Serralves in Porto, Portugal and at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea in Santiago, Spain. Prior to this, she was a curator of The American Century: 1950–2000 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She is also a contributing writer for Art in America and The Brooklyn Rail.

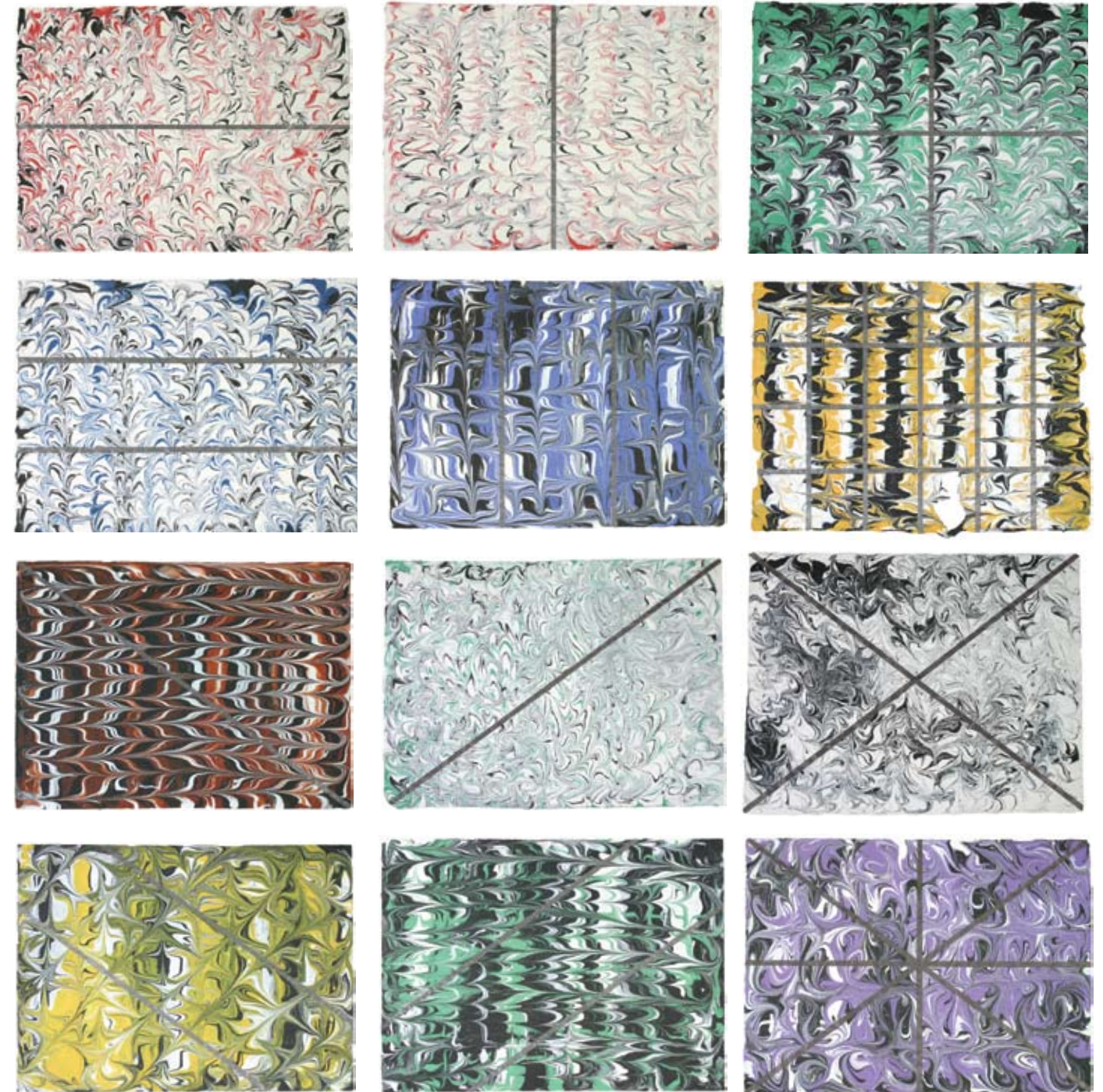
List of works produced

Star Power, 2006
pigmented linen on pigmented abaca
6 x 9 inches each (15.2 x 22.9 cm each)
5 suites of 5

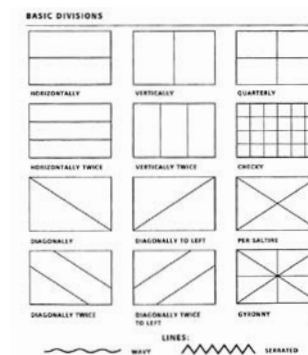
Basic Divisions, 2006–07
graphite on pigmented linen
22 x 30 inches each (55.9 x 76.2 cm each)
suite of 12

Power to the Flower, 2007
stenciled linen pulp paint on abaca
8 x 10 inches each (20.3 x 25.4 cm each)
edition of 50

Basic Divisions (poster), 2007
digital-printing on paper
24 x 18 inches
edition of 500, distributed free during exhibition



1



2

1
Basic Divisions, 2006–07
graphite on pigmented linen
22 x 30 inches each
(55.9 x 76.2 cm each)
suite of 12

2
*World Encyclopedia of
Flags: The definitive guide
to international flags, banners,
standards and ensigns*
Alfred Znamierowski,
Lorenz Books, 1999



3



3
Power to the Flower, 2007
 stenciled linen pulp paint
 on abaca
 8 x 10 inches each (20.3 x
 25.4 cm each)
 edition of 50

4
Star Power, 2006
 pigmented linen on
 pigmented abaca
 6 x 9 inches each
 (15.2 x 22.9 cm each)
 5 suites of 5

4

Exhibition

Polly Apfelbaum
Basic Divisions
 October 13–November 21, 2007
 Reception: Saturday, October 13, 5–7 PM

About the artist

Polly Apfelbaum was born in 1955 in Abington, Pennsylvania. She attended SUNY Purchase College in Purchase, New York, and later earned her BFA at Tyler School of Art in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, in 1978. She lives and works in New York City. Polly Apfelbaum has been exhibiting internationally for nearly twenty years. A major mid-career survey of her work debuted at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 2003 and traveled to the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

Apfelbaum has held recent solo exhibitions at Frith Street Gallery, London, (2007); Angles Gallery, Santa Monica, (2007); Solvent Space, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, (2007); Galerie Nachst St. Stephan, Vienna, Austria (2005); Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, (2004); and Triple Candie, New York, (2003).

She has been featured in several recent group exhibitions, including *Comic Abstraction and Lines, Grids, Stains, and Words*, both at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, (2007); *Pink*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Bombay, (2007); *Welcoming the Flowers* with John Giorno, Senior & Shopmaker, New York, (2007); *Like Color in Pictures* at Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, (2007); *Extreme Abstraction*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, (2005); *The Shape of Colour*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, (2005); *A Kind of Bliss*, The Drawing Room, London, United Kingdom (2004).

Her work is in many important public collections, including: The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, New York, The Henry Art Gallery, Washington; and The Dallas Museum of Art, Texas.

The artist has received important grants and awards such as the Guggenheim Fellowship; the Richard Diebenkorn Teaching Fellowship; the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Award; the Anonymous Was a Woman Award; and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant.

Dieu Donn 

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donn  is a nonprofit artist work-space dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art in the hand-papermaking process. In support of this mission, Dieu Donn  collaborates with artists and partners with the professional visual arts community.

The Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donn . Through this program, Dieu Donn  intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past participants in the program include: Melvin Edwards, Dorthea Rockburne, (2000); Jane Hammond, Jim Hodges, (2001); Robert Cottingham, Polly Apfelbaum, (2002); Glenn Ligon, Kiki Smith (2003); Jessica Stockholder, Arturo Herrera, (2004); Mel Kendrick, Kate Shepherd, (2005); Tony Fitzpatrick, Do-ho Suh, (2006); Jon Kessler, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, (2007).

This is issue number 9 of the Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program publication series documenting the residency program for mid-career artists.

Support for Dieu Donn 

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Cover

Marbled sheets produced for
 Apfelbaum's *Basic Divisions* series

Inside cover

Polly Apfelbaum
Power to the Flower, 2007
 stenciled linen pulp paint on abaca
 8 x 10 inches (20.3 x 25.4 cm)
 edition 9 of 50

